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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Memorandum



THE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

Information as of 1600
11 September 1966

ARMY and DOS review(s) completed.

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HIGHLIGHTS

The 11 September election for South Vietnam's constitutional assembly was marked by a large turnout of registered voters. Final returns will probably indicate that somewhat over 70 percent of the country's voters cast ballots despite widespread Viet Cong terrorism the day preceding the election and scattered incidents during the polling period.

I. The Military Situation in South Vietnam:
Weekend military activity in South Vietnam was light, with the most significant operation being an enemy mortar attack against US Marine elements in Operation PRAIRIE in Quang Tri Province (Para. 1). A mortar attack against Phan Thiet airstrip took place on 11 September (Para. 2). A US battalion engaged in Operation BATON ROUGE reported three fire-fights with enemy units (Para. 3).

II. Political Developments in South Vietnam:
A large voter turnout characterized today's election for a constituent assembly in South Vietnam (Paras. 1-4). Viet Cong antielection activity was widespread yesterday, with at least scattered reports of terrorism continuing in the provinces today (Paras. 5-6). The Buddhist election boycott failed to deter any significant numbers from voting today (Paras. 7-8). Other aspects are discussed in Para. 9. A reorganization of the Regional and Popular Forces will begin on 15 September (Para. 10).

III. Military Developments in North Vietnam:
Two US aircraft were lost on 10 September (Para. 1).

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Further losses to the DRV Navy are reported (Para. 3).

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I. THE MILITARY SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. Military activity in South Vietnam over the weekend was limited to isolated harassing attacks by the Viet Cong and only light contact with VC/PAVN forces in the 33 ground operations currently under way. The only significant action involving US units occurred on 10 September as part of Operation PRAIRIE in Quang Tri Province when enemy forces launched a mortar attack on US Marine elements 23 miles west of Quang Tri city. Five marines were killed and 11 wounded. Three USMC battalions have been in the area attempting to pin down and destroy an enemy force believed to consist of 5,000 men. Since the operation began on 3 August, 46 marines and 295 of the enemy have been killed.

2. A second mortar attack occurred in the early morning hours of 11 September as Viet Cong units made a surprise attack on the Phan Thiet airstrip in Binh Thuan Province. No US personnel were reported killed but the Communist mortar fire succeeded in damaging two medical evacuation aircraft and seven 10,000-gallon fuel bags. Eight rounds landed in the Phan Thiet market area and injured eight South Vietnamese.

3. In III Corps, a battalion of the US First Infantry Division engaged in Operation BATON ROUGE reported three fire-fights with enemy units located about 20 miles southeast of Saigon. Nine Viet Cong were killed in the engagement but a US helicopter was shot down and ten US soldiers were wounded. In the Mekong delta area, ARVN forces reported numerous small-unit actions during 10 and 11 September, but no major engagements are known to have taken place.

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II. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

1. Today's election of a constitutional assembly was marked by a large turnout of registered voters--higher than most pre-election estimates. Final validated returns will probably indicate that somewhat over 70 percent of the country's registered voters cast ballots, despite widespread Viet Cong terrorism yesterday and at least scattered incidents during the polling period. The boycott called for by the militant Institute Buddhists proved largely ineffectual.

2. The high voter turnout demonstrates the government's ability to conduct an election in areas under its control, and provides it with an excellent propaganda opportunity to denigrate the political strength of the Viet Cong. Failure of their extensive antielection propaganda campaign and attempts to disrupt the voting have resulted in a sharp loss of face for the Vietnamese Communists.

The Voting

3. About 69.3 percent of the registered voters in Saigon and Gia Dinh Province--where one fourth of the country's voters live--went to the polls today. By all accounts received thus far, the election was well administered in the capital area, with no evidence of government pressure on the voters or of favoritism toward specific candidates.

4. Totals from the other provinces, as yet unofficial and incomplete, generally range between 70 and 90 percent of registered voters. Voting in central Vietnam, which faced antielection threats from both the Viet Cong and militant Buddhists and other "struggle" force remnants, was high, with the city of Hue reporting a turnout of nearly 86 percent. Official nationwide returns will indicate a turnout of more than 70 percent. Late press reports quoting official government sources on the nationwide voter turnout range between 75 and 83 percent.

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Viet Cong Activity

5. The country-wide level of Viet Cong terrorism and harassment was high from noon yesterday through this morning. Some 90 incidents were reported during the period--roughly a fivefold increase over a normal 24-hour period. Six district capitals received harassing fire, but there was no sensational terrorist action, and no large-scale military activity reported. There were 12 grenade explosions in Saigon yesterday, but the capital was generally free from antielection activity while the polls were open today. Scattered terrorist activity, including some attempts to keep voters from the polls by force, were reported in the provinces.

6. The Viet Cong have not reacted publicly to the election turnout as yet. Although the Viet Cong will undoubtedly describe the election results as fraudulent, it will be extremely difficult for them to avoid loss of face inside Vietnam as well as abroad. One Liberation radiobroadcast this morning claimed that only 15 percent of the people in Saigon would go to the polls. There is a possibility of further Viet Cong terrorism being directed against winning candidates as they become known.

Buddhist Boycott Largely Ineffectual

7. The call for a boycott by militant members of the Buddhist Institute also failed to keep any significant number of voters from casting ballots today. Hunger strikes are being conducted in pagodas in Saigon, Hue, Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Ban Me Thuot, but are attracting little public attention. Other than one attempted march by a group of monks in Saigon this morning, no serious efforts were made by the Buddhists to disrupt the voting today. Polling places in strong Buddhist areas in Saigon were well attended by voters, including some monks from the Buddhist Institute. Thich Tam Chau, leader of the moderate Institute Buddhists, reportedly broadcast an appeal today urging the Buddhist faithful to vote.

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8. Yesterday, the Saigon press carried communiques signed by the Buddhist Institute which among other things called on the people to call off the "struggle." The Buddhist Institute denied the validity of the communiques, and the US Embassy believes that they were a piece of last-minute deception propaganda by the government. Today's press carried a conciliatory statement by Premier Ky to the Institute over differences currently dividing them. However, Ky made no real concessions.

Other Aspects

9. Winning candidates have not yet been announced. The government is planning to hold a full-dress press conference in Saigon tomorrow to announce at least some of the election results.

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In Saigon, there was no evidence of any kind of Catholic boycott today, which might have resulted from either Father Hoang Quynh's Front For All Religions or from implied threats from Father Tran Du, leader of the Catholic Citizens Bloc. Press accounts dealing with the election have been uniformly favorable thus far.

Other Developments

10. US military authorities in Saigon have been informed by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff that a reorganization of the Regional and Popular Forces will begin on 15 September. The changes basically involve the integration of the Regional and Popular Force headquarters into the corresponding regular force headquarters at the General Staff, corps, division, sector, and subsector levels.

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III. MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTH VIETNAM

1. Two US planes were lost on 10 September as air strikes against North Vietnamese petroleum facilities and lines of communication continued at near-record levels. A US Air Force F4C was shot down by a surface-to-air missile after participating in the attack against the Dap Cau highway and railroad bridge 18 miles northeast of Hanoi. Both crew members are presumed lost. Earlier on the same day an air force A1E was brought down by ground fire while attacking PAVN forces near the northern border of the DMZ. The pilot bailed out but is believed to have been captured.

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North Vietnamese PT Boats Attacked

3. The DRV Navy suffered further losses this weekend to its already diminished force of 25-30 patrol and motor torpedo boats. Two US A4E aircraft discovered three camouflaged PT boats moored near an island 44 miles east of Haiphong on 10 September. The boats opened fire on the Navy planes as they made their initial pass. Two US Navy A-6 aircraft then joined in the attack which resulted in the probable sinking of one boat and damage to a second. On 11 September US Navy pilots discovered three additional boats 27 miles east of Haiphong and severely damaged two of them.

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